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ABSTRACT

The Minnesota Extension Service sought to have adult learners provide local leadership for establishing educational priorities as well as to have them become actively involved in the organizational change and program-planning process. Because it was found that many citizens are unprepared for such leadership roles, the extension service developed a program to educate adults for extension education leadership. The program provided training in needed knowledge and skills, opportunities for significant leadership roles, and reinforcement and recognition for assuming leadership. Thus far, the change in the way in which the extension program is operated has been progressing smoothly, and community involvement has increased in extent and quality. The increased citizen involvement in extension activities that has resulted from the leadership training has had significant effects on the state's extension program. In some counties, the community members who have joined county extension committees are urging the professional staff to accept the concept of clustering county committees into groups and to take a more cooperative approach. It is also believed that citizen participation has been an important factor in the extension program's movement from a university subject matter emphasis to an issue emphasis. The leadership training, although designed to make adults assume a more active leadership role within the extension program, has also appeared to encourage many program participants to become more involved in other community activities as well. (MN)

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INVOLVING LOCAL CITIZENS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND PROGRAM PLANNING: EMPOWERING LEARNERS THROUGH SHARED LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Learners who participate in Cooperative Extension Service programs are predominately independent learners. That is, they are not enrolled in a formal degree program, but are seeking educational opportunities which relate to significant problems, concerns, or issues in their lives. Thus, extension programs must be based on a process that involves learners in setting the direction for those programs. The Minnesota Extension Service has developed a strategic plan and restructuring which will shift its focus away from being subject driven and toward being issue and program driven. Successful implementation depends upon learner involvement.

The Minnesota Extension Service sought to have learners provide local leadership for establishing educational priorities as well as to have them involved in the process. Many citizens are unprepared for such leadership roles. In order to assure that extension moves in new directions, and to prepare citizens for involvement, we developed a program to educate adults for extension education leadership.

The program provided training in needed knowledge and skills, opportunities for significant leadership roles, and reinforcement and recognition for assuming leadership. The results of the program indicate that change is moving smoothly and that community involvement has increased in extent and quality. Ultimately these effects have moved the organization toward implementing its strategic plan and have increased the likelihood that extension's programs will meet significant educational needs in communities.

State Cooperative Extension Services throughout the United States are being challenged to offer non-formal educational programs which address significant concerns of independent adult learners. To do so requires that program development begin with citizen involvement in identifying their most pressing problems and community issues. Issues and problems which are educational become the basis for extension's efforts. This approach applies two principles of adult learning: (1) adults learn best when their needs and goals are incorporated into education, and (2) adults seek education which they can apply in their own lives.

Minnesota Extension Service (MES) developed a strategic plan and restructured to focus on people and their needs. These changes are a shift from being university subject-matter driven to being learner and program driven. Adding to the complexity of such change is that a county government partner must also be involved in the new direction. Frequently in extension change is not implemented effectively at the local level because county partners are not prepared for the change.

Because the new approach in MES focuses the organization's efforts on significant problems of local people, having county partners fully participating is essential. The restructured organization calls for counties to form clusters in order to deliver higher quality programs more effectively. This notion runs counter to the Minnesota tradition of local autonomy and decentralization. It calls for cooperation across county government lines. Local participation in clustering would be critical to successful implementation.

In Minnesota we have County Extension Committees (CECs), boards of nine citizens in each county, which are legally charged with program planning, employing extension agents, performance appraisal, public relations, and budget, in conjunction with the county professional staff and the University of Minnesota. Historically these committees have felt a high degree of ownership for their county extension programs and staff. Their independence has contributed to a strong level of local support, but it has frequently complicated centralized systems. A major shift in program focus and a reorganization with impact upon counties would be difficult to implement without CEC support. Thus, MES needed a way to help local citizens understand the vision of the future extension service and to involve them in creating that future. Citizen involvement in educational leadership at a local level was the goal of our program.

Education for Involvement

As an adult education organization, the Minnesota Extension Service created an educational program to address this need. The program prepared local citizens for leadership roles in determining the direction for their county's extension education efforts and in implementing a new organizational structure. The program was based on the premise that citizens can provide leadership if they are taught the knowledge and skills they need, if they have a significant leadership role that calls on them to use the skills, and if they receive reinforcement and recognition for their leadership. While we could not afford to train all 783 CEC members, we could train two CEC representatives and one county extension agent from each county who, upon returning to the county, would train other CEC members. This group would have two leadership roles: providing overall direction for the process including training others on the committee, and leading a broader group of citizens in issue identification.

Teaching the Knowledge and Skills

Because adults have experiences, knowledge, and skills which should be incorporated into educational programs, experiential learning is particularly well-suited to them. Kolb's (1976, p. 2) experiential learning model provided the design for the training conference for CEC members. For each segment we used learning activities appropriate for all phases of the cycle:

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE
OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS
FORMATION OF ABSTRACT CONCEPTS AND GENERALIZATIONS
TESTING IMPLICATIONS OF CONCEPTS IN NEW SITUATIONS

For example, participants learned how to conduct nominal group discussions to identify community problems and issues. In that segment learners used their previous community experiences as the information resource base for the process (concrete experience). They participated in a nominal group discussion in which they considered implications of those experiences for community issues (relfective observation). Participants then received information on how to conduct discussions in their communities (abstract conceptualization). Finally, they made plans for using the technique in their counties and implemented those plans (active experimentation). This cycle was repeated to teach other skills: selecting priorities for educational programs, allocating resources, and helping professional staff make time for new priorities.

We taught knowledge and skills which would be immediately applicable to citizens' work in their counties, which provided a clear structure, and which did not require in-depth group process or leadership training. Each approach was flexible enough for use in a variety of local circumstances. For example, nominal group process will help any group identify and systematically discuss problems or issues. Because it is highly structured, citizens with basic communication skills can apply it in many settings. While more sophisticated methods of identifying issues (e.g., the Delphi Method) are available, nominal group process is more powerful as a tool for typical adult learners. We developed each technique to suit the characteristics of the adult learners we had as our target audience.

We also used the experiential learning cycle to demonstrate implicitly the benefits of clustering. County groups formed working teams with neighboring counties. These clusters worked together for the remainder of the conference, considering their common problems and issues, setting priorities, and discussing how clustering might proceed.

Creating Significant Leadership Roles

Bringing citizens together and exciting them about possibilities was not enough. Frequently after a training conference new ideas are not implemented. We addressed this problem by creating significant leadership roles for CEC members and communicating clear expectations to them.

The Director of Minnesota Extension Service delivered presentations on the restructured organization, expectations of CEC members, and what the future

might look like if MES were successful. These combined to create a vision and expectation of significant leadership roles for citizens.

We also created significant leadership roles by asking CEC members to complete two tasks. The first was to educate other CEC members and county commissioners about roles for CEC members, ways they could be involved in planning extension programs, and the new structure. The second task was to participate actively in program planning and to report the priority issues for extension programs in their counties.

Both expectations were intended to keep CEC members involved after they left the conference. Finally, CEC representatives were invited to meet again at district conferences where they could report to their cluster group on progress they were making in their counties. Participants had a commitment to one another as well as to extension administration at the University of Minnesota.

We provided several tools to help CEC members meet the expectations. They were given sets of materials to use nominal group technique for identifying issues in their communities. They received materials for setting program priorities and for helping agents make time for new priorities. We provided a form on which to report program planning efforts including a list of issues, a brief description of the process they used, and a list of who participated in the process. Finally, CEC members had access immediately to videotapes of the Director's address, a tool for educating other CEC members and commissioners. Participants need not translate the Director's words; others could hear the message for themselves.

Reinforcement and Recognition for Leadership

The third part of the educational approach was reinforcement for what CEC members learned and recognition for their work. While we were confident that the training experience was powerful, the expectations clear, and the tools useful, we also knew that participants would be more likely to accomplish the program goals if we had repeated ways to reinforce the training.

We established continuing connections among group members and between CEC members and ourselves. We sent summaries of information that the groups generated during the conference. We invited CEC members to join our county staff at our spring district meetings. In preparation for that meeting, we sent them reminders about the program planning update that they were to submit. All

of these established connections among this group while also reinforcing the importance of active involvement.

We provided recognition for CEC members who participated in the program. County staff received news releases regarding the conference to publicize those who attended. Each CEC member received a certificate recognizing their participation in training and their contributions to extension program planning. We have given this group skills so that they can be leaders for the rest of the committee and in their communities; such peer recognition is probably more significant than what we can provide.

Outcomes of the Educational Program

Through adult learners we sought to have an influence both on the Minnesota Extension Service and on communities around the state. To date the outcomes have been significant.

Effects on the Minnesota Extension Service

The organization's goals were to have county partners understand and provide leadership for changes resulting from strategic planning and restructuring. The educational program has succeeded in that effort. Within nine months of the training, all 87 County Extension Committees had voted to join a cluster. Before the training less than twenty might have committed to the plan. Furthermore, the extension committees are meeting more frequently, and actively assuming leadership roles in implementing these changes. CEC members have formed cluster extension committees. In some counties the CEC members are pushing our professional staff to accept clustering and its implications for staff specializations. CEC members report that their experience in working together during training convinced them that they have many problems in common with other counties and that a cooperative approach would be successful. As one administrator has said, "We couldn't eliminate clustering from our restructuring now if we wanted to!"

A second organizational goal was to move from a university subject-matter emphasis to an issue emphasis. The citizens who participated in the conference are having a major influence on that movement. CEC participants have worked with county extension agents to train other members of the local committees; for

example, in 65 counties the CEC members used the videotape of the Director to teach other committee members about their roles in program planning. In most counties training participants also taught nominal group process to other committee members.

Participants, and those they taught, have led the issue identification process in counties through nominal group process. They have recruited citizens to participate in the discussions. They have also used systematic processes to establish priorities from among the issues identified. In many cases the citizens who have been involved are less tied to existing extension programs than are the staff who have been conducting those programs. Even where citizens have a vested interest in a particular program, throughout this process they have taken leadership responsibilities seriously and have looked beyond their own narrow interests toward the interests of their communities. Evidence for that can be found in the effects they have had on their communities.

Effects on Communities Around the State

The purpose of educating citizens for involvement in extension is to assure that the needs in local communities will be identified and met. Thus, securing more widespread participation at the local level is an important outcome of this educational program. The effects are beyond our expectations. We had as a goal that on average 20 citizens per county would participate. Because the techniques we taught required a substantial time commitment by citizens (one or more evenings meeting together), we felt that securing participation statewide by 1740 citizens would be a significant accomplishment. Our initial counts conservatively place the total number of citizens participating statewide to be well over 3500. This far exceeds our standards for program success.

Another indicator of important effects on communities is the range of constituencies that have participated. Some of the groups represented in the county issue identification process include: public health nurses; city council members; homemakers; media personnel; Chamber of Commerce members; school board members, administrators and teachers; clergy and church representatives; hospital administrators; farmers and representatives of farm organizations; bankers; community educators and vocational school faculty; small business owners; county commissioners; U.S. Forest Service personnel; youth (4-H members, others); law enforcement officers; nursing home personnel. More than ever

before, non-traditional constituencies in the communities have had an opportunity to help set the direction for local extension educational programs. CEC members who participated in the training were the key to community involvement. Once they learned specific skills for providing leadership, they had the access and the influence to secure participation by a broad range of people.

Ultimately the success of the education for involvement program will be judged by whether it has affected the nature of programs delivered in communities and by the effects on learners in those communities. The issues being identified are the first step to those outcomes. The following issues have emerged as significant to many counties: family stress, maintaining family unity; agricultural profitability; youth self-destructive behaviors including alcohol and chemical abuse, teen sexuality, and lack of self-esteem; solid waste and land use; community vitality; lack of employment opportunities; family economics; quality and financing for public education; family economics; problems in maintaining small businesses. While agricultural profitablity may be seen as a "traditional extension issue," the others are clearly programs which will move us in new directions. Each county committee established priorities which professional staff are using to develop programs that will be responsive to community needs. Training for staff has given them the skills they need to translate issues into programs. The extent to which we are able to deliver programs statewide will determine whether this program has affected communities beyond these immediate outcomes.

Summary and Conclusions

Learners who participate in Cooperative Extension Service programs are predominately independent learners. That is, they are not enrolled in a formal degree program, but are seeking educational opportunities which relate to significant problems, concerns, or issues in their lives. Thus, the programs we plan must be based on a process that involves learners in setting the direction for those programs.

In Minnesota Extension Service we believe that learners should not only be involved in the process, but they should provide local leadership for establishing those educational priorities. However, we also know that many citizens are unprepared for such leadership roles. In the past, simply

expecting leadership has resulted in professional extension staff taking on roles that citizens should more appropriately take. In order to assure that extension moves in new directions, and to prepare citizens for involvement, we developed a program to educate adults for extension leadership.

The program provided training in needed knowledge and skills, opportunities for significant leadership roles, and reinforcement and recognition for assuming leadership. The results of the program indicate that change is moving smoothly in Minnesota Extension Service and that community involvement has increased in extent and quality. Ultimately these effects have moved the organization toward implementing its strategic plan and have increased the likelihood that extension's programs will meet significant educational needs in communities.

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